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Review Essay

No war, no peace...and Sri Lanka simmers

Crucible of Conflict: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka, Dennis B. McGilvray. Duke University Press, Durham, NC (2008).

Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict, Neloufer de Mel. Sage, Los Angeles (2007).

As if Sri Lanka did not manage to garner enough international attention nearly a year ago (May 2009) during the final days of a bloodied and tragic ethnic and civil war, ferociously fought between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), it continues to capture the interest of the international media for the politically convoluted missteps the current regime takes in the post-war context. Each measure taken by the current political regime at first glance seems rash and myopic – and indeed each is, given that the state is missing a historic opportunity to forge a peace alliance that is visionary and grounded in the realities of a multi-ethnic and class-ridden social fabric. Yet there is also a protracted and simmering political backdrop that is worth bearing in mind with regards to the underlying political complexities which continue to shape its vicious and contemporary politics. Indeed, honing in on the scales and spaces within which the micro-politics of everyday life in Sri Lanka gets played out shows how transforming a post-war Sri Lanka into a peaceful country is likely to be laden with challenges – and one which is unlikely to make much headway as long as political leaders remain entrenched in ethno-chauvinist political positions.

Scholars from anthropology and cultural studies have been in the forefront of attempts to understand the country's fraught and contentious political fabric. The interventions by these scholars are critical for those interested in geopolitics because they focus on the minutiae of everyday life. This scrutiny offers a critical lens through which to analyze and understand the ways in which the ruling regime has been able to disregard the need for an imaginative and far-sighted vision of a radically transformative ethnic and class politics. In this regard, the recent academic contributions by McGilvray and de Mel are critical responses to the call for continued engagement with the ways in which ethnic fratricide triumphs over the more subtle and yet devastating consequences of class inequality in Sri Lanka.

Amongst South Asian and Sri Lankan scholars working on eastern Sri Lanka, Dennis McGilvray's early scholarship needs little introduction. He has engaged with the uniquely matrilineal coastline since the early 1980s (McGilvray, 1982, 1989), having done his extended fieldwork between 1970 and 1971 with shorter trips of 3–5 months between 1975 and 1978. Through his numerous articles, he has brought to our attention the complex sociological relationships which place women in the region amongst Muslim and Tamil ethnic communities in a favorable position. These matrilineal inheritance patterns and practices have been the adulation and

near envy of many South Asian feminists because of the ways in which they lend women to be favorably positioned in the country with their access to land and property rights (Agarwal, 1994). In *Crucible of Conflict*, McGilvray expands on this early work to investigate social dynamics in the region that incorporate Sinhala and Burgher communities as well as the Muslim and Tamil communities that were the subject of his earlier work.

Although McGilvray has conducted fieldwork in eastern Sri Lanka since his early publications – in 1993, 1995, and during each summer between 2001 and 2007 – he nonetheless draws heavily on his earlier ethnographic research in *Crucible of Conflict*. The bulk of this volume details the import of matrilineal kinship relationship and patterns unique to the primarily Tamil speaking area of Akkaraipattu – an agricultural village on the east coast – with meticulous detail on the social structures of Tamils and Muslims in the region. Despite the political and social volatility of the region, the importance of this contribution is that it points to the shared cultural heritage between the two dominant communities in the area. The minutiae of social relations within and between Tamil and Muslim communities in eastern Sri Lanka are well crafted for the patient reader, offering coverage of kinship and caste practices in the region to the neophyte. Sharing matrilineal names, the absence of a caste hierarchy, and the practices of matrilineal descent structures in religious situation for instance illustrate the common legacy between Muslims and Tamils from the locale. It is in the last section of the book that contemporary political events and the ways in which they simmer in eastern Sri Lanka are discussed. While anecdotes on violence, torture and destruction encountered by the people that McGilvray visits and revisits in the area are noted, they are not subject to the necessary analytical interrogation for understanding why eastern Sri Lanka is the 'crucible' of conflict. McGilvray's book successfully demonstrates how ethnographic understanding of shared kinship practices and common heritage is crucial in the study of ethno-nationalist conflicts, lest one fall into superficial categorizations that merely reproduce rather than analyze the conflict in question. However, for a comprehensive understanding of how these tensions impact the conflict in eastern Sri Lanka, the book needs to be complemented with one that launches a more sustained examination of the conflict itself.

The history of social relations between Muslims and Tamils offered by McGilvray's *Crucible of Conflict* are central reminders of the long and thorny politics at stake in Sri Lanka. The intricacies of the country's political realities then require a more scrupulous analysis of current events and shifts. It is here that de Mel's *Militarization of Sri Lanka* offers a more illuminating read of the ways in which contemporary public culture is used to shape, manage and consume the ethnic conflict as an everyday occurrence in numerous sites. The purpose of the book is to appreciate how political events are constructed through a cycle of contestation, resistance and interventions,

which is materially embedded and yet has the capacity to “naturalize and mask our own embeddedness within it” (p. 12). Yet, the book is keen to point out that “militarization is a contingent, dynamic process” (p. 49) and hence the contemporaneous milieu in Sri Lanka does not have perpetual and ubiquitous links to a dark and historical past. By extension it also means that it need not remain as such for shaping, envisioning and imagining a radically alternative and peaceful future.

The theoretical framework for this powerful book emanates mostly from cultural theory, although de Mel also engages in inter-disciplinary conversations with other fields in the social sciences and humanities. Her research covers the period spanning the late 1980s to 2005, with fieldwork in the main conducted from 2000 onwards – with her borrowing from prevailing scholarship to situate the period prior to this. She uses thick description to examine and analyze sites of advertising, wounded soldiers, children caught in conflict, censorship, women suicide bombers, and audiovisual archives in the Sri Lankan milieu to point to the overt and subtle markers of the militarization process, with some of these spaces evocative of the ways in which militarization is resisted. It is a brave work, for it is an incipient effort to alert us to the everyday practices in Sri Lanka that subject us to an institutional and ideological apparatus which is replete with symbols and markers of a militarized society. Throughout the book, she shows how “gender, race, nation, ethnicity and capital intersect to form a mutually supportive grid” (p. 13) of militarization, wherein the state and the LTTE share culpability in the process-making of militarized activities.

Advertising and the ways its rhetoric is capitalized to market war and peace is de Mel's opening. She shows the ways in which local and global forces, including capital, intersect to mediate and profit from discourses on national security. Local docudrama illuminates ideological markers of civic duty and patriotism, which also goes so far as to present barrack life in aesthetically seductive ways, where heterosexual masculinity and comradeship are nurtured through the involvement of “brave and virile” young men in the military. Militarism “promises both individual and collective transformation...as complementary subjectivities” (p. 69), which aids the naturalizing of militarist ideology through effective packaging.

Military advertising has little space for the displacement, disabling and loss of life. But what of the “brave and virile” young men who have paid the price of the military effort by having to bear the loss of limbs and disability through their participation in the war? De Mel looks at how pain is staged in the Butterflies Theatre; a creation of disabled soldiers who challenge the ways in which young, virile, able and masculine bodies are constructed in the militarized discursive terrain, with this hegemonic narration being undermined in the ways in which they script themselves into the discourse. The sexual anxiety and psychosis that comes through war's wilful injuring and the economic necessity which shoved them into joining the army initially are laid bare through the plays of the Butterflies Theatre. The theatrical space highlights how the coming together of militarized society, politics and culture renders the disabled soldier as deviant and freakish, when in fact his disability is a wilful injury derived from the war.

De Mel continues with her astute analysis of the cultural sphere by looking at Batticaloa's (eastern Sri Lanka) Butterfly Peace Garden, where children caught in conflict and everyday violence create their tales of mourning and melancholia. The stories woven by the children through plays, stories, fantasy and acting point to how the past, present, loss and memory are negotiated as they are deeply tangled up with the violent politics of the present. Similar to the Butterflies Theatre, the Butterfly Peace Garden unearths alternative forms of belonging and intimacy where the fixity of ethnic identities and dominant discourses are ruptured

with “both utopia and dystopia...(becoming)...sites on which the visceral conditions of war in the everyday are experienced” (p. 188).

Her final two chapters deal with censorship, women suicide bombers and audiovisual archiving of women's experiences of war, conflict and the 2004 tsunami. Because women suicide bombers leave behind limited or no self-representations, they become appropriated by both the state and the LTTE where their subjectivity and sexuality are controlled and represented in contentious ways. Going against the dominant discourses of ethno-nationalism deployed by the state and the LTTE can incur great costs to and wrath against many women. Equally, the cinematic depictions of the sexual economies of gender relations which stem from the war setting also draws suppression and opprobrium – including financial constraints – showing the multiple intersections which powerfully reproduce dominant narrations of militarized nationalism. The focus on women continues with the audiovisual archives as a means through which testimonies and memories of identity, human rights and globalization get played out. The space of testimony is a critical space for de Mel, since it “involv[es] deliberate silences on the part of witness pointing to what can not be spoken about in the case of extreme trauma” (p. 247). She shows how this archival space of memories has also been a critical space for feminist peace activism, but fears how narratives of women's suffering could also be used to stir ethno-nationalist sentiment.

Through the subjects and subjectivities of war-affected men, women, and children, de Mel reveals not simply the tragic excesses of a three-decade war in Sri Lanka, but also how they need to be situated within the framing discourses to show how classification and identification operate. She hones in on the body as an elemental grouping and by doing so evokes how subjectivity, politics and suffering are an embodied experience within a particular political economic terrain. This is a worthy intervention, although in her attempt to assimilate a huge range of data into her perspective there are some minor slippages of her analysis on the ways in which the global and local economy interact and intersect within a militarized milieu. Notwithstanding this slight concern, it is a critical and abiding engagement of Sri Lanka which helps locate and situate how ethno-nationalism and militarization have been made seductive for its people. Unsurprisingly then during the latest Presidential elections held in late January 2010, between the incumbent President and the former Army General, there was a “naturalized” setting which enabled the two leading candidates to battle it out as “war heroes” and “true patriots”. They were able to do so because the wider backdrop in post-war Sri Lanka is one which has barely begun to scratch the surface for conceding the monumental challenges that lie ahead for negotiating and constructing a peaceful landscape where class inequality and polarizing ethnic politics are challenged head-on by political leaders across the ideological spectrum. In this sense the myopia remains.

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